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CD-ROM at the Service of Society: Amnesty Interactive and Material World

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CD-ROM at the Service of Society — *Amnesty Interactive and Material World*

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tion. They believe companies are reaping great profits at their expense.

Two products have appeared to shatter that image. The first,

High prices for library-oriented CD-ROMs, as for most vertical (niche) market titles, have prompted complaints about price-gouging and profit skimming. Critics have focused on the difference between the selling price and the production costs of the disc (\$1.00-\$1.50), ignoring the costs incurred in compiling, editing, and preparing that data for publica-

Amnesty Interactive, was conceived and created by a multimedia studio called **Ignition**, based on materials provided by **Amnesty International**. *Amnesty Interactive* sells for \$10 to cover the costs of materials and marketing; and Voyager distributes it on a non-profit basis through retail outlets, catalogs, and direct toll-free telephone orders (800-446-2001). One might expect such a product to have a low-budget look with little appeal. False assumption!

The producers say that "if you're not going to pay people, you can recruit the best and most expensive ones." Artists, writers, educators, and multimedia specialists have all volunteered their services, as did **Leonard Nimoy** who narrates. *Amnesty Interactive* uses words, pictures, animation, and music from around the world to tell human interest stories, educate, and raise consciousness about the meaning of human rights.

The title includes: a history of human rights from ancient times to the 20th century, presented through the ideas of noted thinkers and political figures; an atlas that describes human rights conditions all over the world, including many countries we might

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not expect to find listed here; a gallery of animation from around the world, illustrating human rights themes; a collection of stories featuring former prisoners of conscience from Amnesty International case files, illustrated with portraits from leading photographers; a soundtrack of world music; reference documents in electronic form, provided as curriculum support. "What Others Are Doing" and "What You Can Do" sections featuring QuickTime video interviews with educators, activists, and entertainers show what each of us can do to help prevent inhumanity. Unlike news programs that arouse emotions and provide no outlet, *Amnesty Interactive* offers various alternatives to help make a difference.

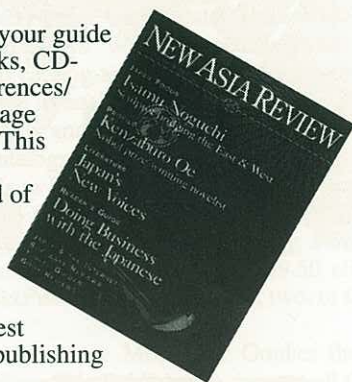
We might expect such a product to be "preachy" and heavy handed. Not so! It has a very attractive and user-friendly interface and treats the subject in a very personal manner. The stories from the case files are particularly powerful. They include articulate and powerful accounts like those of **Vaclav Havel**, **Paul Hill**, **Hsiu-lin Annette Lu** (founder of a feminist press and arrested in Taiwan in 1979). This title puts faces to the case files and makes the presentation more personal and real. Violations of human rights are not confined to Third-World countries. Virtually every country is represented on this disc, including the United States.

Amnesty Interactive comes in both Macintosh and MPC versions.

The second title, *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, looks at who we are by looking at our possessions. The underlying principle is that the material things we choose to own say

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more about us, our values, and our lifestyles than sociological treatises. **Peter Menzel**, founder of the project, says that "It wasn't photographing the oil well fires in Kuwait or the anarchy of war-torn Somalia that pushed me over the edge into *Material World*; it was hearing a **National Public Radio** story late in 1992 about the marketing of pop star **Madonna**'s sex-fantasy book. The original material girl rode the crest of self-generated waves of publicity and consumerism for weeks. The book and the singer seemed to hold more interest for people than the pressing issues of our day. I thought the world needed a reality check."

The United Nations and the World Bank helped Menzel and fifteen other photojournalists select statistically average families in 30 of the United Nations' 183 members. They considered variables such as location, type of dwelling, family size, annual income, occupation, and religion. They then went to live with these families for a week, photographing them at work and play. They interviewed each family, asking them 62 questions about their family life, values, living conditions, and aspirations. They shot over 2,000 rolls of film and recorded over 112 hours of audio and video, an average of 65 rolls of film and 4 hours of video for each family. They also recorded hundreds of vignettes in their personal journals.

Material World, narrated by **Charles Kuralt**, exposes us to a variety of lifestyles and cultures as reflected in the families' possessions that include cultural heirlooms, crafts, religious imagery, television sets, and electronic gadgets. It takes viewers into the life of an average family in a way that even experienced travelers seldom see.

One of the title's unique features has each family appear in front of their home surrounded by their possessions. For some families, this was a simple task; for others, it became a major undertaking. For example, to photograph the Israeli family, all their material goods were loaded onto a specially designed crane platform and suspended several stories above the ground.

Material World is not only a picture book with human interest stories. It is also a reference tool with lots of data and statistics. It includes an extensive database of statistical data on topics such as vital information (population, birth and death rates, lifespan, infant mortality, literacy rate, schools), food, shelter, livelihood, leisure activities, and community. Viewers can examine the data as numbers or graphs for easy comparison. Data boxes provide a quick overview of a family's country including climate, population, principal languages, and religions. The journalists also recorded their own notes on each family. During their week-long visit, they asked each family to answer 64 questions, such as "What is each family member's most valued possession?", "What is a typical breakfast?", and "What kind of future do they see for their children?". Some of the answers are quite surprising. Users can also answer the same questionnaire to compare themselves with the families in *Material World*.

The **United Nations Population Fund** provided support for this unique project. Recognizing that educational opportunities in many of these countries are minimal, Menzel and his fellow photojournalists have established a scholarship fund that will use a portion of the profits from *Material World* to educate the children of the featured families.

In addition to Macintosh and MPC versions that list for \$39.95, *Material World* is being published as a 256-page coffee table book by **Sierra Club Books**.

Both *Amnesty Interactive* and *Material World* put a human face on the subjects they cover, making the numbers and statistics more personal. Purchasing these products, libraries can provide important information to their patrons very economically and know that their funds will also help important social causes.